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# HARVARD THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

VOLUME IX

APRIL, 1916

NUMBER 2

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## UNIVERSITY PREACHING

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY

The classic chapter in Newman's *Idea of a University* on "University Preaching" remains at many points as timely and convincing as when it was written, in 1855. Its discrimination of real from spurious earnestness—"I do not mean that a preacher should aim at earnestness, but that he must aim at his object . . . which will at once make him earnest"; its warning against the recondite, remote, and abstract—"The most obvious truths are often the most profitable"; its advice that sermons should be prepared in writing, but spoken without notes—"While then a preacher will find it becoming and admirable to put into writing any important discourse beforehand, he will find it equally a point of propriety and expedience not to read it in the pulpit"—all these counsels and principles, though Newman throughout his preaching at St. Mary's violated the last of them, are as applicable as ever. Yet, on the other hand, the force of Newman's teaching is for many readers limited by his reiterated reference to ecclesiastical authority. What St. Francis de Sales, or St. Charles, or St. Antoninus, may have said about sermons is as-

sumed to be of more significance than the judgments of the not less saintly Newman. The preacher whom Newman has in mind is a Roman priest, who "has before his mental eye the Four Last Things," and feels "the horror and the rapture of one who witnesses a conflagration." Even the elementary truth that "definiteness of object is . . . the one motive of the preacher" is by Newman fortified as "the doctrine of St. Charles, St. Francis, and other saints"; and the practice of preaching without book but with written preparation, is commended not so much for its effectiveness as for its conformity to the examples of St. Augustine and St. Chrysostom, and to the advice of St. Carlo. Citations like these, though they testify to the touching humility of Newman's own mind, must impress non-Catholic readers as interruptions of the master's teaching rather than as re-enforcements of his luminous thought. The preacher of whom one of the most competent of English critics could say that, if he were sentenced to a desert island and permitted to take with him but two authors, he would select the plays of Shakespeare and the sermons of Newman, needs no confirmation of his counsels from Constantinople or Rome. In a word, the reader of Newman's chapter, if he be not a priest, must content himself with the by-products of the great teacher's intention, his allusions and analogies, his sagacity and irony, or what Mr. Hutton calls his "clear atmosphere," which "flows round you, pressing gently on every side of you, yet like a steady current carries you in one direction"; while he receives many of Newman's specific instructions as though they were delivered in an unknown tongue.

When one turns from this epoch-making essay to the later history of University preaching in England, he is again met by extraordinary merits and by obvious limitations. Both at Oxford and at Cambridge the Uni-

versity pulpit has been regarded by Anglican preachers as offering the best of occasions for their most serious thought, and the many volumes in which their University sermons have been collected make a very considerable library of dignified, though for the most part fossilized, remains. The first characteristic which impresses one in these English University sermons since Newman's time is their prodigious length. They are, as a rule, not so much sermons as treatises, intellectual achievements rather than homiletical appeals. Canon Mozley's famous sermon on the "Reversal of Human Judgments" contains not less than seven thousand words, and even at full speed of delivery must have required at least an hour of oratory; a prolongation of eloquence which would in most American congregations involve a reversal of human judgment on the merits of the preacher. His sermon on "Eternal Life," as though to justify its title, is still more indifferent to the passage of time. Bishop Lightfoot's University sermons at Cambridge are in actual number of words somewhat less formidable, though their weighty, and even ponderous, thought must have demanded hardly less time for its expression. Canon Liddon, in the preface to his first series of University sermons, remarks: "The reader will bear in mind that this is a volume of sermons. It makes no pretence to be a volume of essays. A sermon is confined within narrow limits." When, however, one turns to the discourses so modestly described, he finds a standard of dimensions to which the words "narrow limits" can hardly be applied. "The Law of Progress" is described in not less than ten thousand words, as though it were a planetary rather than a personal law; and the famous sermon on "Immortality" suggests in its thirty-one closely printed pages a timeless leisure in its hearers.

To the quality of sheer bulk must be added as a further characteristic of English University sermons the sub-

jects regarded as appropriate. A preacher, summoned to this academic opportunity, has usually felt himself called to grapple with some vast and comprehensive theme which shall be worthy of a Christian scholar, and has used the occasion, not so much for moral or religious edification, as for the elaborate discussion of some topic of philosophy or theology. He has had in mind not an audience but a problem, and has set himself to prepare, not a sermon, but a book. "The Atonement"; "Sacerdotalism"; "Nature"; "The Athanasian Creed"; "The Conflict of Faith with Intellect"—such have been typical subjects for preachers before the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Even Newman, when he passes from his *Parochial and Plain Sermons* to his *University Sermons* applies his homiletical gifts to a new intention. His volume is for the most part a series of discussions on the relations of faith and reason, and, as he remarks in his preface, "constitutes an exploring expedition into an all but unknown country." Accordingly, as his biographer reports, his University sermons, "though they were regarded by more speculative minds, as by Newman himself, as containing his best and most valuable thoughts," were "*caviare* to the general."

A striking illustration of this tradition of academic fitness is provided by the first impression made on English readers by the sermons of Phillips Brooks. In the fulness of his fame his torrential eloquence overwhelmed the conventional anticipations of English audiences, and his spiritual elevation of thought taught them a new significance in the great words: "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." His first volumes, on the contrary, were greeted by many English readers with perplexity, and by some with condescension. The *London Spectator* of October 4, 1884, reviewing his *Sermons preached in English Churches*, while admitting that "This is a very striking volume of sermons,"

proceeded to remark: "Mr. Brooks seems to us to be more acute than profound, more ingenious than penetrating. His thought is not always quite clear, and it is never deep. . . . Mr. Brooks is a fine preacher of the second class. . . . The deeper, more essential truths of religion do not seem to be very congenial or natural to him; but his sermons are full of interest to those who like to reflect on the secondary truths, the accidental development of morality and life." Never was a reviewer more misled by presuppositions. The approach of Phillips Brooks to the "deeper and more essential truths" through the "accidental and secondary," the homiletical skill with which a figure, an incident, or a phrase, becomes the narrow door through which one enters the great aisles of spiritual vision, the strategy which avoids a frontal attack on truth and reaches its citadel by suggestion and illustration—all this is unobserved by a critic who measures greatness by academic standards, and to whom a preacher is of the second class if he be not erudite, ponderous, or obscure. The same judgment might have been passed on the parabolic teaching of Jesus Christ. The very qualities of intimacy, suggestiveness, and vision, which gave those parables their wings, have given to the preaching of Phillips Brooks its permanent power, while those University sermons which have subordinated homiletics to dogmatics and life to literature, are with few exceptions respected rather than read. It is a curious fact that the English sermons of the last generation whose vitality has remained most undiminished by time were preached, not—as one would anticipate—before the Universities, but at Brighton by Robertson, at Lincoln's Inn by Maurice, at Birmingham by Dale, at St. Mary's, Oxford, in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* of its Vicar, and in London, at Bedford Chapel by Stopford Brooke, and in Little Portland Place Chapel by Martineau.

When one passes from this academic tradition of Anglicanism to the later history of University preaching in the United States, he is met by a most interesting transition. Religion, in the older American colleges, had been for two centuries or more regarded as a form of compulsion, to be applied in the course of educational routine. Attendance at worship was required, and preaching, though in many instances of distinguished excellence, was as a rule administered as a form of penal discipline. When, on the other hand, the State Universities were established and supported by taxation, the maintenance of worship became regarded as inconsistent with the principle of non-sectarianism; and while every other topic of human concern, from metaphysics to blacksmithing, received scientific attention, the administration of religion was delegated to the competing Churches, which promptly established their preaching-stations at the gates of the Universities. Neither of these alternatives, of sectarianism and of secularism, has wholly commended itself; and a fresh experiment in University preaching has had in many institutions reassuring success. It must be detached from sectarian interests; it must deal with the comprehensive subjects in which all congregations of worshippers are concerned; and it must be of such a quality as to induce the voluntary attendance of young people in the course of their education. It must be offered, not as an obligation but as an opportunity. Religion must be regarded as a privilege to be gladly accepted by the unconstrained sympathy of academic youth.

These conditions of efficiency have created a special type of preachers who have been sifted out by their hearers as best adapted to address the Universities. The same persons are now welcomed by many institutions, remaining for a brief term of residence as temporary chaplains, and undertaking many forms of pastoral care;

and one of the most serious tasks of University administration is to secure as visiting preachers the best representatives of this limited group. Their preaching must have in mind the special doubts and sins which peculiarly tempt the academic life. It must be intensely personal and direct, and must avoid at all costs the sin of prolixity. Its first aim is to win and hold attention; and while sensational or acrobatic methods of attaining this end would be received by such hearers with ridicule or contempt, much may be accomplished by cogency, compactness, brilliancy, and epigram. The result is a kind of preaching which for lucidity and force has perhaps never been excelled. The alert minds of students are quick to recognize any sign of artificiality or pomposity, and to rebel against condescension or formalism; but they are responsive to reality, sympathy, and a just interpretation of the motives and ideals of youth. The University preachers, therefore, who have found most general acceptance under these conditions provide a striking instance of the survival of the fit.

One of the most admirable examples of this type of preaching is the *Straight Sermons* of Henry Van Dyke. The author frankly confesses the limits of his intention. "Their real purpose," he says of these sermons in a preface, "is nothing else than to help people to be good. . . . No thinking minister can stand up before a company largely composed of young men without a strong wish to be plain-spoken and to come straight to the point. . . . For this reason I have tried to write these sermons, not in a theological dialect, but in the English language." No one who has had the privilege of hearing any of these sermons can recall them without gratefully acknowledging that they accomplished all that was thus proposed. They were "Straight Sermons," from the compelling aphorism which as a rule arrested attention at the beginning to the abrupt appeal at their close.



They were like the arrow to which the poet-preacher once likened life:

"You must know  
What mark to aim at, how to bend the bow;  
Then draw it to its head, and let it go."

"A Man"; "Courage"; "Power"; "Faith"; "The Horizon"—such were the themes which should "help people to be good." "This is a sermon about Courage," begins one; and it ends, "If we have been brave enough to live, we shall be brave enough to die in peace." "There is no landscape which is not bounded by a horizon," begins another, perhaps the finest sermon in the book; and toward the close its teaching is summed up: "Our great need is not to know more about religion, but to be more sure of what we know."

The same characteristics of unassuming directness and ethical intention are conspicuous in the *University Sermons* of Henry Sloane Coffin. "They are," he says in his preface, "necessarily colloquial." They were "preached to congregations of students." They are, in a word, the translation into language easily apprehended by young people, of a singularly vivid and genuine experience of Christian discipleship. At many points they reproduce the terse and sparkling method of the *Straight Sermons*. "Here is a contrast," one sermon begins, "between gods that men carry and a God who carries men; between religion as a load and religion as a lift." At other points they are more Biblical in allusion than Dr. Van Dyke's sermons, and more picturesque in title and form. "Fools for a Purpose"; "Revelation by Concealment"; "Abilities suicidally used"—topics thus introduced invite curiosity and compel attention. Vitality, reality, and communicative power are felt in every phrase. Taken together, these two collections illustrate at its best the transition from formality to

reality which now characterizes University preaching in the United States.

If the conduct of University worship were invariably committed to preachers so inspiring as these, there could be little room for criticism. They use the "English language," it is true, but they use it with dignity and force; they are "colloquial," but they lift colloquialism into eloquence. If, however, the single desire "to help people to be good" becomes the ruling principle of less gifted preachers, they may be less successful in interpreting the spiritual needs of University hearers. Brilliancy, fervor, spiritual passion, and dramatic force are, it is true, better homiletical instruments than ponderous logic or bookish erudition. A sermon is designed for listeners rather than for readers, and the mind of the preacher should be concerned with immediate effect rather than with a posthumous volume. Yet, on the other hand, a University is not primarily established "to help people to be good," and a University sermon is not "necessarily colloquial." A University exists to promote truth; its controlling maxim is the sublime promise, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free"; and its sermons, if they are to be consistent with the aims and respected by the members of a University, must be contributions to truth as well as exhortations to conduct; convincing to the reason as well as appealing to the will. A University preacher may attempt too much; but he may also attempt too little. He may miss his mark by aiming too low as well as by aiming too high. He meets an audience which is keenly aware of the fundamental problems of religion and ethics, and he may forfeit his opportunity by dwelling on the incidental, the fanciful, the ecclesiastical, or the obvious. He may win attention but lack authority. He may entertain rather than sustain. The preachers of the last generation who are still recalled as moulding the lives of University

students—preachers like President Walker at Harvard, President Woolsey at Yale, President Hopkins at Williams, President McCosh at Princeton, and their peers in other institutions—impressed their hearers, not as being brilliant or colloquial but as being masters of religious problems and at home in the great spaces of the spirit. When they put forth their sheep they went before and the sheep followed them, for they knew their voice. If they did not have always in mind, as Newman urged, “The Four Last Things,” they were profoundly concerned for that first thing which is worth seeking, the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.

It would seem, then, that the English tradition of University preaching, though it may have encouraged impersonal, scholastic, and prolix discourses, has something still to teach to the ardent, personal, and practical intentions of many American preachers. The more picturesque and vivacious method may indicate the best way of approaching a theme, while the English habit of regarding a University as existing to promote substantial truth may suggest the end which the preacher should hold steadily in view. Imagination, narrative, poetry, and appeal remain the legitimate tools of the University preacher, but they are all put into his hands for the shaping of rational thought and the establishing of academic idealism. University preachers, in a word, cannot anticipate unqualified respect and gratitude unless they are recognized, not only as kindly pastors or brilliant rhetoricians, but as manifesting an intellectual mastery equal to that of the academic teachers at their side. They must be thinkers not less than orators, seers as well as doers, scholars as truly as saints.

This synthesis of vitality with wisdom, of personal appeal with philosophical insight, is not without distinguished illustrations in the University preaching of

the United States. The *Counsels to College Men*, by President Tucker of Dartmouth College, for example, combine in a striking degree the intimate approach and the large horizon. In their primary concern for students as hearers they depart from the English tradition; but in their sweep of thought and large conclusions they are of the school of Newman and Mozley. "Let me speak to you of the satisfactions of life," begins one of these discourses, as though preacher and student stood together on the level of ordinary experience; but the same sermon ends on the heights of mature and prophetic vision: "The modern world will not long be the world which marked a sudden shift from mediaevalism. The reaction is spent. Neither is it the world of raw force and of rank material power. The noise and smoke of its work, its sudden and unstable wealth, its pride and vain-glory, its impossible art, its commercialized morals, its crude, self-sufficient, unbelieving men—all these are fast going the way of their kind. These do not make up the world of to-morrow, the world in which your achievements are to be ranked and in which you are to be measured. You are in a world which will have ample room in it for the intellectual life, for rewarding action of every kind, for sincere and satisfying companionship and for faith. Do not miss your place in it. Do not live out of date. Make your own generation. Take the better fortune of your own time." Again the same preacher begins, with persuasive simplicity, "I want to speak to you about Jesus' test of moral maturity"; but near its close he rises to the passage: "I count it a great moral obligation of all believing men to have faith in the working power of Christ's sayings. . . . Believe in men against appearances. Do not take men at their word when they talk below themselves. Use the true, never the false in human nature, and persist in doing this. So shall you gain access, every one of you in his own way,

to the heart of humanity." Here is movement, lift, enlargement, surprise. Through the narrow door of personal experience the hearer is led into the great temple of a rational faith. Moral inspiration and intellectual precision meet, and from their fusion proceed light, heat, and power.

Finally, one turns to the unrivalled master of University preaching and recalls the method and aim of Phillips Brooks. No audience hung on his words with such complete responsiveness, and before none was the flame of his eloquence so quickly kindled, as among the students of a University. "This spoils one for anything else," he said one Sunday evening at Harvard. "This is the best of preaching-places." Not his sermons only but quite as much his conduct of free prayer, with its lift of soul and its vision of God, remains for those who listened a permanently sacred and chastening memory. One detail of his method is sufficient to correct much theorizing about preaching. Phillips Brooks was amazingly unhampered and copious in speaking without notes, and he employed this method with increasing frequency. When, however, he came to the University, a sense of the situation appeared to dictate to him the use of manuscript, and his University sermons were habitually read, with his desk lifted to its highest point and his hands swiftly turning the many pages. Yet this apparently restrictive method involved no loss of communicative power. No gesture was practicable save a quick toss of the massive head or a tense grasp of the preacher's gown. No representation of Phillips Brooks could be more inaccurate than the figure which commemorates him in Boston, with its hortatory attitude and its brandishing arm. Yet no hearer could escape the electric contact of his thought and the flash of his lifted eye. The manuscript was forgotten in the man. It was the same with Newman. In his later

and Catholic years, it is true, he advised that University preaching should be without notes; but in the great days of his own preaching he did not himself conform to this advice. "His sermons," Mr. Gladstone, then an undergraduate, said, in words which might have been written of Phillips Brooks, "were read, and his eyes were always bent on his book." Yet this habit did not obstruct his "delicate realism," nor blur the memory of that "wonderful blending of reality of insight with absolute faith in the spiritual world."

In Phillips Brooks's University sermons the blending of the personal with the permanent, the incidental with the universal, seems complete. It is quite true, as his English critic remarked, that he often appears to be dealing with the "accidental developments of morality and life"; but these familiar accidents are used by him to disclose the working of eternal laws. As one of the most appealing of his University sermons—"Deep Calling unto Deep"—says of life, one may get from the preaching of Phillips Brooks as much or as little as he will. Sometimes "deep calls to shallow," and the critic observes only the "accidental developments" of the theme. "Sometimes shallow calls to deep," and "power is wasted on the insignificant facts of the hour." Only when "deep calleth unto deep" is "the responsiveness of the life of man, the proportion between man and his world" secured. The same cumulative movement may be traced in "The Wings of the Seraphim." Attention is first arrested by the "majestic vision," and structural simplicity is foretold in the picture of the three pairs of wings. Then with convincing progress the preacher interprets the mystic wings as symbols of the higher life. Reverence covers the face; self-forgetfulness covers the feet; active obedience gives the wings that fly. "It is because of irreverence, self-conceit, and idleness that our lives are weak." It was a message which the young men

of Harvard University who heard it will never forget; and when, later, that sermon and others akin to it were "preached in English Churches," the tradition of insight and depth which had there been established as the test of University sermons became amplified by the more graphic and vivid method of the American pulpit, and the concurrent judgment of both countries acknowledged that the consummate type of University preaching had been attained.